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Language policy and ‘new speakers’: an introduction to the thematic issue

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Abstract

In recent years, sociolinguistic research on minority languages in Europe, particularly in the Galician context, has chiefly contributed both theoretically and empirically to the growing attention given to ‘new speakers’, as well as to the emergence of a European research network in 2013 entitled ‘New Speakers in a multilingual Europe: Opportunities and challenges’ (www.nspk.org.uk). As documented in special issues and edited volumes, the research activities in the network not only aimed at adding the term ‘new speaker’ to the growing pool of analytical terminology in critically oriented sociolinguistics. Employing ‘new speaker’ as a lens rather than as a clear-cut notion is what we—as editors—had in mind when giving shape to this volume, drawing on discussions during the final phases of the above-mentioned research network. This seemed especially useful because such a broad take on ‘new speakerness’ opens up avenues for comparative research under a common label. In sum, it is certainly worth the effort to continue delving deeper into the notion of ‘new speakers’, and particularly to do that from the perspective of language policy. The articles collected in this thematic issue aim at contributing into that direction.

Keywords Language policy · ‘New speakers’

‘New speaker’ research finds its origins and thrust in autochthonous minoritized language communities in Europe. While the label has only been introduced relatively recently in English-language terminology, it has a longstanding presence in several minoritized language communities. It is since long used by everyday language users to describe speakers of the minoritized language who have acquired it

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through non-traditional ways and, as such, features in the work of (anthropological) sociolinguists. In Catalonia, the term *nous catalans* (i.e. ‘new Catalans’) refers to speakers who were on their way to becoming bilingual and acquiring Catalan in predominantly Castilian-speaking settings (see Woolard 1989; Crameri 2000 who documents its use in the work of Alexandre Cirici). In Ireland, *gaeilgeoir* is used to refer to Irish language enthusiasts who were not brought up with the language (Zenker 2013). In Basque, the term *euskaldunberri* literally translates as ‘Basque new speaker’ (see Urla 2012). In Galicia, new speakers of Galician are described as *neofalantes* (O’Rourke and Ramallo 2011).

In recent years, sociolinguistic research in the Galician context (O’Rourke and Ramallo 2013) and comparative work on Galician and Irish (O’Rourke 2011) has chiefly contributed to the growing attention given to ‘new speakers’ as well as to the emergence of a European research network in 2013 entitled ‘New Speakers in a multilingual Europe: Opportunities and challenges’ (see www.nspk.org.uk). As documented in special issues and edited volumes (see O’Rourke et al. 2015; O’Rourke and Pujolar 2015; Smith-Christmas et al. 2018), the research activities in the network not only aimed at adding the term ‘new speaker’ to the growing pool of analytical terminology in critically oriented sociolinguistics. Scholars in the network also aimed at broadening the research scope through capturing and explaining the diversity of ‘new speaker’ profiles in a great variety of contemporary settings. The fact that research in the network deliberately moved away from an exclusive focus on autochthonous minoritized language constellations has turned ‘new speaker’ into a generic term that—in line with O’Rourke et al. (2018: 614–615)—could be said to refer to individuals who make regular use of a language that is not their first language, but a language they acquired outside of the home, often through the education system or as adult learners. Such a definition opens the door for a number of critical questions, most of which have been debated at the occasion of workshops and conferences organized by network members.

Obvious questions not only include what is meant with a ‘regular language user’. It is also possible to ask from what point onwards a learner can be considered a (regular) user, at what point ‘new speakers’ cease to be ‘new’ and become ‘old’ ones (see, in this respect, Dewaele 2017), and how far ‘new speaker’ as a concept differs from existing notions such as ‘non-native speaker’ and ‘L2-speaker’. Importantly, questions might also be raised whether the ‘new speaker’ concept is not primarily to be seen as one—among many other—fashionable concepts that are part of a tendency towards a sloganization in sociolinguistics (see Schmenk et al. 2018). We do believe that such questions need to be urgently debated on the basis of the available literature, including the papers in this special issue. Different arguments deserve to be scrutinized, particularly in connection to the idea that ‘new speaker’ as a notion contrasts with more reified terms such as ‘L2’ or ‘non-native’ speaker by not focusing on the idea of deficit or deficiency, but instead putting more emphasis on the creative possibilities that a speaker may have available. The same goes for the statement that a learner may find it more difficult to think of him or herself as a regular user of the language while ‘new speakers’, instead, do frequently attempt to use their newly acquired language on a regular basis, often emphasizing their legitimacy as users of the language (O’Rourke et al. 2015).

It would also be worth debating if—rather than trying to use it as a clear-cut notion—‘new speaker’ could perhaps be more easily employed as a lens to shed light on a diversity of contexts in which speakers from different backgrounds come to settle in or are already settled in a certain country or region. Once they settle there, they familiarize themselves (in a school setting or not) with a language variety that is used by a majority of speakers (who acquired this variety as their ‘first language’) in almost all domains of language use. They add this variety to their language repertoire and display different sorts of language competences and different degrees of code-switching and code-mixing. In so doing, they start making active use of the language in certain domains/spaces in a shorter or longer period of their life. At any rate, employing ‘new speaker’ as a lens rather than as a clear-cut notion is what we—as editors—had in mind when giving shape to this volume, drawing on discussions during the final phases of the above-mentioned research network. This seemed especially useful because such a broad take on ‘new speakerness’ opens up avenues for comparative research under a common label. Such comparative research could focus on the types of language competences that ‘new speakers’ in different settings develop under different conditions and at different stages in their life. Another focus could be on the actual language practices of ‘new speakers’ from various backgrounds in various settings with special attention given to the actual structure and features of the ‘new speaker’ varieties of a given language and the actual use that is made of it. Yet another line of research to which this special issue aims to contribute is the investigation of the sort of attention given to ‘new speakers’ in language policies as they exist in many spheres and at many levels of society and the role of ‘new speakers’ as language policy actors.

Research in the aforementioned network showed that there is some value in exploring the analytical and theoretical punch of the ‘new speaker’ label for language policy scholarship. If, for example, the goal of institutional language policies in minoritized language communities has often been to enlarge the pool of speakers by incorporating precisely ‘new speakers’ to the community, then the question is to what extent the emergence of these ‘new speaker’ profiles has altered specific language policy settings. How were or are debates formulated around speaker legitimacy, and how did or do these debates evolve over time? On a more general level, what happens to the traditional ‘top-down’ versus ‘bottom-up’ dichotomy when the emphasis is placed on the speaker and his or her agency potential? In this way, does the ‘new speaker’ label help us think of language policy itself from an original point of view? Can it be added meaningfully to the ongoing discursive turn in language policy studies? While acknowledging all the points of constructive criticism raised above, we believe there is certainly value in exploring these and related questions, connecting ‘new speakers’ and language policy explicitly. This is our goal in the present thematic issue, whose contents we briefly summarize next.

In the opening piece, following directly from the above discussion, Darquennes and Soler reflect on the extent to which ‘new speaker’ research, with a focus on language minority settings, feeds into recent theoretical discussions in language policy scholarship, especially in connection to the discursive and ethnographically oriented perspectives which of late have become increasingly prominent. The authors begin with a brief overview of the ‘new speaker’ concept, its theoretical and empirical

origins, and then situate the discussions on ‘new speakers’ historically set against the background of traditional language policy research. Thereafter the bulk of the article is dedicated to developing two main arguments: first, Darquennes and Soler provide an overview of the language policy themes that are already present in ‘new speaker’ research; and secondly, they elaborate on how ‘new speaker’ studies can contribute to current discussions in the field of language policy. The authors conclude with a short overview of future research directions that, in their view, can strengthen the link and the mutual benefits of the connection between ‘new speaker’ and language policy scholarship.

The following article by O’Rourke and Nandi examines the role of ‘new speaker’ parents who have made a conscious decision to bring up their children in Galician, a language which they themselves did not acquire in the home. Although intergenerational transmission has for long been considered a crucial part of linguistic vitality, ‘new speakers’ bring complexity to this paradigm and in particular prompt questions about their role as parents and as potential agents of sociolinguistic change in the process of language revitalisation. Through their individual as well as collective linguistic practices, ‘new speaker’ parents have the potential to generate visible and/or invisible language planning on the ground, influencing their children’s language learning and creating future generations of speakers. As such, these parents, through their own linguistic behaviour, can play a potentially significant role in the revitalisation and maintenance of Galician outside the school. Drawing on two focus group discussions involving seven families in two of Galicia’s urban centres, Santiago de Compostela and Vigo, O’Rourke and Nandi investigate how these ‘new speaker’ parents exercise their agency and become policy makers in their homes.

Augustyniak and Higham’s article targets the role of sub-state languages in the integration process of migrants in two sub-state regions: Wales in the UK and the Basque Autonomous Community in Spain. The authors investigate how language and the idea of ‘belonginess’ based on language learning and knowledge is constructed in the integration policies in the two officially bilingual regions. They analyse policy documents on the topic of integration of migrants in the respective regions, as well as how the role of language is in turn understood, accepted or contested by migrants. Using ethnographically oriented methods of enquiry such as observations of linguistic practices as well as semi-structured interviews with migrant learners of Welsh and Basque, this analysis seeks to contribute to the growing field of LPP as a multifaceted area of study, and, in this case, project migrants as agents in policy-making processes. Augustyniak and Higham find that despite distinctive and ambiguous roles ascribed to both official languages of each region, ‘new speaker’ migrants ascribe certain values and roles to each language, which are not necessarily acknowledged or envisaged as such in integration policies. They propose that taking the voice of ‘new speaker’ migrant learners into account would improve language and integration policymaking in these two sub-state regions and help to redefine the role of language resources in national ‘belonginess’ according to the needs of the stakeholders involved.

The following contribution, by Spotti, Kroon and Li, brings together the concepts of ‘new speaker’ and globalization induced mobility, and it examines their implications for language policy. The article first describes two historical phases in

language policy development that are closely related to a sociolinguistics of stability. It denounces that present-day language policy is attached to specific time and space constraints the focus of which is a by now outdated concept of language and of speaker as its prescriptive objects, thus leading institutional language policies to not being 'in sync' with contemporary 'new speakers' socio- and geo-political movements and developments. This proposition is illustrated in two case studies, both located in the Netherlands and dealing with the language practices and connected policies of two types of 'new speakers'. The first case deals with the experiences of asylum seekers being engaged with 'techno-literacies', i.e.: asylum seekers being part of ICT assisted classes for civic integration through the learning of Dutch ('new speakers' of a new language, learning through new means of language learning). The second case deals with Chinese students who are fully proficient in Dutch, attending language heritage classes for learning Mandarin through book based lessons ('new speakers' of an old language, learning through old means of language learning). In both cases, the observed language practices and meta-pragmatic judgements of the individual language users elect them as initiators of bottom-up sociolinguistic change that, while offering grassroots solutions for local challenges, also plays a role as local evidence for informing future top-down language policy development.

Soler and Marten, in the following article, begin by noting that the term 'new speaker' has recently emerged as an attempt by sociolinguists not only to understand the different types of speaker profiles that can be found in contemporary societies, but also to grasp the underlying processes of becoming a legitimate speaker in a given society. In this article, the authors combine the results from two studies situated in two educational institutions in Estonia in order to find out about speakers' language attitudes and experiences in connection to learning and using Estonian. Soler and Marten concentrate on members of the international community in two different educational contexts who have relatively recently arrived to the country. Their discussion indicates that these speakers fluctuate between two prototypical discourses, which they broadly dub as 'resistance' and 'adaptation' to 'newspeaker-ness'. Soler and Marten's study thereby adds to current debates on 'new speaker' and language policy issues by illustrating how tensions around language legitimacy are played out on the ground in a small nation state such as Estonia.

Taking the Norwegian construction industry as its site of study, the final empirical article by Kraft discusses migrant workers' conditions for obtaining the status as 'new speakers' in the workplace. These conditions are determined by language proficiency requirements and speaker hierarchies that are constructed through language management at various institutional levels (legislation, industry and workplace). Moreover, the article highlights how language management in the construction industry ascribes linguistic competences, especially competences in the nation-state language Norwegian, with value. Ultimately, this value entails opportunities as well as challenges for the professional lives of migrant workers. The study uses an Ethnography of Language Policy approach combined with Foucauldian discourse analysis which emphasises discourses as social practices. Discourses of policy documents and recommendations are analysed and contextualised with workplace practices and workers' accounts from three

different Norwegian construction sites. Kraft's article contributes to the study of new speakers by providing insights into language management in a workplace dominated by multilingualism, migration, and temporariness.

Finally, in the concluding piece, Williams starts with a critical reading of the different contributions by the preceding articles in the issue. He then moves on to offer an evaluation of the progress made to date in a number of fields such as conceptual advancement, ideological dispositions, migration and international mobility before contributing a series of policy related recommendations and an assessment of the challenges yet to be faced by researchers and practitioners in the emerging cluster of interest known as new speaker research.

All in all, as noted above, we believe it is certainly worth the effort to continue delving deeper into the notion of 'new speakers', and particularly to do that from the perspective of language policy. In this effort, relevant theoretical and empirical contributions can be made. We are confident that the articles included in this special issue work towards that direction in at least three ways: (1) by placing language policy issues at the centre of discussions around 'new speakers'; (2) by broadening the scope of 'new speaker' research beyond minoritized language contexts; and (3) by contributing to the discursive turn in language policy research. We hope this will inspire further research and discussions among both experts and policy-makers. In particular, it would be enriching for research on 'new speakers' to move beyond a European-centred focus, and to find ways to include studies from (minority) language areas from other parts of the world. It would also be important to incorporate more research that investigates what happens outside educational settings, as some of the articles included in the issue already do. Altogether, we hope that readers will find the case studies presented in the following articles relevant, and that they will feel inspired to join the discussion, pushing both 'new speaker' and language policy research further.

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